

EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE INDIANS



Heart-to-Heart Child Advocacy Center Cherokee, North Carolina

Founded: 1998
Service area: 56,688 acres in western North Carolina
Population: tribal enrollment is approximately 12,500
Source of funding: federal, tribal

Contact: Regina Rosario, Director
Heart-to-Heart Child Advocacy Center
P.O. Box 673
Cherokee, NC 28179
828-497-7477
Fax: 828-497-7479

Lori Jump
Program Manager
Sault Ste. Marie Tribe Victim Services Program

Program Description

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Reservation stretches through five counties in western North Carolina, through rugged and remote areas of diverse terrain. In addressing the needs of its members, the tribe partnered with state and county agencies that were often unaware of the cultural traditions and issues that affected investigations. At the Heart-to-Heart Child Advocacy Center, “kids have rights, too!” Heart-to-Heart is a program that focuses on providing comprehensive evaluation and services to abused children on the Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina. The center’s goal is to “stand for children,” and it uses a holistic approach to prevent children from being further victimized in the legal system. Through the services Heart-to-Heart offers, Indian children’s rights on the Eastern Cherokee Reservation are protected and the children learn someone is there to support and help them through a difficult legal process and provide opportunities for healing. From the investigation

to testifying in court to the healing process, Heart-to-Heart stands for children.

The seeds of Heart-to-Heart began when Regina Rosario, a criminal investigator for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, became concerned that cases of abused and/or neglected children were not being prosecuted consistently. Rosario attended training for Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) and decided that such a program was needed on the Cherokee Reservation. The CAC model is designed to establish a child-friendly setting for the forensic examination and interview and uses a multidisciplinary team approach to minimize the number of times a child is interviewed and to ensure that those involved in the child’s life are working together. This approach provides an opportunity to help the child through the trauma of abuse and a safe and secure environment where healing can begin. CACs have been in place in non-Indian communities for quite some time, but the model needed to be adapted to meet the needs of tribal

communities and children. In addition, multiple jurisdictions and agencies involved with crimes against Indian children had to make a commitment to work together. At Heart-to-Heart, tribal and federal law enforcement, tribal child protective services, prosecution, mental health, and medical and educational agencies come together under one roof as a multidisciplinary team (MDT) to coordinate their responses to child victims and witnesses. Heart-to-Heart provides for child interviews and victim support by MDT or staff members who are familiar with the culture and the child's community. For example, Rosario works with the FBI agents assigned to the case and attends all forensic interviews. She ensures that interviews are done in a way that respects the child.

Comprehensive Services

Heart-to-Heart services extend beyond the forensic interview process. Staff members continue to work with children if they have to appear in court, which can be a traumatic experience. To ensure continuity, each child is prepared for the possible court appearance by advocates who have already been involved with the child. The children visit the empty courtroom and are told about the people who will be in attendance and their roles, and what to expect at the hearing. This tour helps the children gain confidence so they can tell people in the court setting what happened to them. The advocate also goes to court with each child who has come through the CAC. The Heart-to-Heart staff provide the necessary support to help the child talk about the abuse in open court, and then to begin the healing process.

By providing a therapist on their staff to provide emergency as well as ongoing counseling for children, Heart-to-Heart also ensures that each child is helped through the healing process. Other programs operated out of the center include

- ◆ Criminal investigation.
- ◆ Case management.
- ◆ Victim services coordination.

- ◆ Counseling for nonoffending family members.
- ◆ Teen counseling.
- ◆ Support groups.
- ◆ Community education and training.
- ◆ Short-term therapy.
- ◆ Stress management.
- ◆ Anger management.
- ◆ Crisis intervention.

The comprehensive “wrap-around” approach allows Heart-to-Heart to focus on all aspects of abuse—from prevention and healing to stopping the perpetrator. The emphasis at Heart-to-Heart on extended services for the child and members of the child's support system and family members is exemplary and provides a model for other tribes.

Protecting Confidentiality

One of the most important aspects of Heart-to-Heart is that it has established a reputation among tribal members of protecting confidentiality, making it a safe place to talk about private matters. Policies and procedures are in place to ensure that children can feel safe when they disclose their abuse experience. Heart-to-Heart believes that confidentiality is key to helping the children heal. At the same time, the interagency coordination that is necessary to complete investigations, proceed with prosecution, and provide support to the family requires sharing information at the CAC. To this end, memorandums of understanding (MOUs) are in place to establish how and when information can be shared.

An important component of the Heart-to-Heart Center is coordination and collaboration with the local federal prosecutor. With the support and enthusiasm of the current Assistant U.S. Attorney (AUSA) on the MDT, cases are being prosecuted that would not have been prior to the development of Heart-to-Heart. Through the

efforts of the team, a strong message is being sent to child sexual abuse offenders that abuse will not be tolerated, and that they will be held accountable for their actions.

Keys to Success

- ◆ Adapt already existing models to fit the community. The Child Advocacy Model can be adapted to fit the particular needs and traditions of a tribal program and government.
- ◆ Work with prosecutors to send a strong message to perpetrators that child abuse will not be tolerated.
- ◆ Protect victim privacy. MOUs are critical to protect victim privacy and confidentiality, especially when interagency communication is necessary.

Quotes

Our main goal is to take care of the children first.

—Regina Rosario
Director

Heart-to-Heart Child Advocacy Center

I tell these children, 'We're going to walk you through the courtroom, we're going to tell you what you have to do, and we're going to be there for you through the whole process.' It gives them more confidence to get up there and say what happened to them.

—Regina Rosario
Director

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